

Editor's Review Column

Utopia, Politics, and Antipolitics

David M. Bell. *Rethinking Utopia: Place, Power, Affect*. (Routledge Innovations in Political Theory). Routledge, New York and London, 2017. 178 pages.

S. D. Chrostowska and James D. Ingram (editors). *Political Uses of Utopia: New Marxist, Anarchist, and Radical Democratic Perspectives*. (New Directions in Critical Theory). Columbia University Press, New York, 2016. 331 pages.

Dick Howard. *Between Politics and Antipolitics: Thinking about Politics after 9/11*. (Political Philosophy and Public Purpose). Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2016. 293 pages.

Dimitris Vardoulakis. *Stasis Before the State: Nine Theses on Agonistic Democracy*. (Commonalities). Fordham University Press, New York, 2018. 153 pages.

This article is the first in a new series of Editor's Review Column's to be published in *Policy Futures in Education*. The primary and modest purpose of this innovation for the journal is expand the number of texts that are reviewed in it. However, in doing so, a broader intention, which attempts to engage with and encourage interdisciplinary work in the field of education, as well as draw other from outside the field to it, is revealed. A large amount of excellent and important work is published in a range of disciplines which educationalists are not often introduced to and, equally, the educational resonances and ramifications of this work often go unexplored. Each column will be guided by a theme which draws together several texts that are considered to offer insights which might productively inform educational theory and debate. The objective of the column is not to exhaustively relay the content of each text and display its full implicit or potential educational reach; it is rather to shine a light on these texts so that they might be examined further. We hope that readers of the journal will find this column of interest and that new readers from other disciplines might be drawn to the work of the journal through it.

It is perhaps appropriate that the first column includes a reading of two texts which engage directly with the concept of utopia, as the column is itself guided by a notion of somewhat utopian interdisciplinary aspirations. The first of these, David M. Bell's *Rethinking Utopia: Place, Power, Affect* is a recent missive from the field of utopian studies, which is itself often engaged in producing highly interdisciplinary research. Bell's text is no exception, drawing on political philosophy, literature, music, and pedagogical theory. In his introduction to the text, also outlining what will be engaged with in his fourth chapter, Bell designates the four forms which utopianism must operate against (the state; capitalism; dystopian forms of identification; colonialism), as well as outlining what he considers to be the positive utopian subject: the killjoy, whose 'no' 'is not an interruption to a process: it is an essential, intractable part of that process.' (154-155). In elaborating on his description of the killjoy, he draws on the work of Elizabeth Ellsworth, which he argues 'outlines how the supposed 'goods' of critical pedagogy can ossify into a set of myths with a repressive function' (152). Bell is drawn to the agonistic character of the classroom that Ellsworth describes, 'with students and teachers working together and sometimes against one another, including through joy-killing and naming the operation of whiteness, masculinity and heteronormativity' (152). This agonistic model of the classroom helps to figure a broader notion of an agonistic utopia(nism), defined by struggle. This struggle, tension, or dissonance is most clearly figured by Bell through the example and experience of improvised free jazz. Through his own personal introduction to this experimental form of music he 'experienced the radical unknown of a utopianism firmly grounded in the material of history, but reaching well beyond, constructing places that I still struggle to make sense of.' 16-17). For him, 'to embrace utopianism...is to embrace this struggle.' (17). The utopianism he describes is also 'prefigurative' but 'doubly/ininitely so, for it is not prefigurative of any final form but rather of further prefiguration.' (123). It is through these kinds of realistic and actionable theoretical formulations that Bell makes *Rethinking Utopia* into a text which is not only academically rigorous and provocative but also practically useful in the hands of educators whose experiences are often marked by struggles which seem very far from utopian. Bell's measured, agonistic, prefigurative utopianism of place helps to show how this struggle can itself have utopian dimensions.

Because of this, Bell might have been a productive contributor to S.D. Chrostowska and James D. Ingram's edited volume, *Political Uses of Utopia: New Marxist, Anarchist, and Radical Democratic Perspectives*. Presenting thirteen impressive chapters, plus an **Emile Bojesen, Utopia and Politics, Policy Futures in Education 0(0) pp. 1-4. Copyright 2 © 2017 SAGE Publications. Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210317739490>**

introduction and 'coda', this book collects new and old work by extremely eminent scholars in the field, including Ruth Kinna, Raymond Geuss, Jacques Rancière, Miguel Abensour, Étienne Balibar, and Peter Hallward. While the eminence of these contributors is, of course, impressive, it is notable that the majority of contributors are emeritus, senior professors, or have, sadly, recently passed away (Miguel Abensour and Francisco Fernández Buey). For a publication in a series titled 'New Directions in Critical Theory' it might have been useful to solicit at least some work of outstanding earlier career scholars; as David M. Bell's book shows, it is not as if they are not around. James D. Ingram's helpful introduction, 'Utopia and Politics', presents the book as a case against the claim that 'utopias are inherently antipolitical', arguing instead that 'utopias are political through and through' (ix). Ingram, quite incorrectly though, claims that 'the province of politics, it seems, is somehow absent from the map of utopia'(x). Perhaps the focus on academic 'household name' scholars such as Rancière and Balibar has distracted the editors from the excellent and important work on the relationship between politics and utopia by scholars such as Darren Webb, whose work will be of particular interest to those working in education, Lucy Sargisson (who is referenced by a key contributor, Ruth Kinna, and the other editor, S.D. Chrostowska, in her coda), and Laurence Davis (who co-edited a 2009 book, *Anarchism and Utopianism*, which included work by a large number of other scholars connecting utopia to politics, with Ruth Kinna). These issues of contribution aside, the selections for this volume reach across a broad range of important themes and trajectories of utopian and political thought, many of which will resonate with educational philosophy, theory and practice. The two strongest contributions, in terms of drawing together politics and utopia in new and important ways, are the coda, 'Utopia, Alibi', by Chrostowska (269-310), and Ruth Kinna's 'Utopianism and Prefiguration' (198-215). Their essays are the most nuanced and clearly engaged with the deep implications of the intersection of politics and utopia. Unlike some of the rather grand and sweeping claims made in the essays by the more prominent scholars, Chrostowska and Kinna get truly to grips with the subject at hand. For Chrostowska, 'politics must be returned to the body of the political actor. This step has already been taken with the emergence of groups that are beginning not only to theorize but to show the way back to *somatics*, or concrete body-politics. Second, this properly *political* body must be conceptually restored to utopia.' (272) These intentions lend themselves to the more explicitly anarchistic and prefigurative approach developed by Kinna, where, in the texts she explores, 'prefiguration contests the

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frequent and unthinking association of anarchism with destruction, and instead stresses the experimental, productive, and innovative characteristics of anarchist practices that seek to replace or challenge hierarchical and oppressive social forms.’ (202). Both of these developments in utopian and political thought resonate strongly with Bell’s argument in *Rethinking Utopia*. Together, Kinna, Chrostowska, and Bell might help us to think about what an anarchistic, agonistic, prefigurative utopianism might look like in formal educational contexts, and how they might shift or develop the capacity educators feel they have to make change.

The agonistic claim made for utopianism by Bell and Ingram’s rejection of the common assertion that ‘utopias are inherently antipolitical’ sets a useful context within which to engage with Dick Howard’s *Between Politics and Antipolitics: Thinking about Politics after 9/11*. Howard’s claim for politics generally is an agonistic one; for him, antipolitics, like utopia for Bell, is defined by an absence of contestation (obvious examples would include totalitarian politics and urges). The book is a collection of essays, most of which, apart from the introduction and chapters nine and eleven, have been published previously, but which all oscillate illuminatingly between the theme of the political and the antipolitical. His introduction to the text briefly lays out a theory of engagement which underpins the specific focus of each following chapter:

Engagement does not result from either political or moral certainty; it is both an ethical stance and a political commitment. It is an attempt to see and to feel clearly the fault lines that constitute present reality without the expectation that they can be overcome by an intervention from the state or by any other authority. The varieties of such engagements depend on the particular circumstances of the moment. They are the product of reflection and the result of judgment. They are an expression of the experience that has made a person who he has become, and for that same reason each new engagement is a challenge to the legitimacy of previous engagements, and also of oneself. (6)

While Howard presents this definition specifically in terms of the political and his own engagement with it in the chapters collected, there is much to be said for the applicability of this approach to educational contexts, perhaps especially in the light of the texts discussed

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above. Drawing on a range of (mostly political) philosophers, especially Claude Lefort, Hannah Arendt, and Karl Marx, navigates the complex relationship between the political and social, democracy and capitalism, communism and new left politics. Howard helps to show how cautious and self-critical political thinkers and actors — we might also include educational thinkers implicitly or explicitly engaged with political contexts — need to be in their proclamations and actions. Antipolitics is not simply presented as the dark opposition to a democratic politics but rather as a constituent part of political life. For him, ‘the challenge is not to eliminate the contradiction between politics and antipolitics; the task is to recognize — to re-cognize, to rethink critically — the historically contingent dialectical interdependence of these two modes in which the political is expressed in a given society.’ (179) With Howard’s help, it might be possible to begin to chart how this contradiction is manifested in and through educational contexts and aspirations, and what the implications of those contradictions might be.

There are similarities between Howard’s approach and that of Dimitris Vardoulakis in *Stasis Before the State: Nine Theses on Agonistic Democracy*, especially in terms of the complexity read into democracy’s relationship to the political. However, Vardoulakis grounds his thinking less in political theory (and the ‘primacy of the political’, which is the title of one of Howard’s previous books) and more in ethico-ontological philosophy which emphasises the pre-sovereign form of the political: democracy, which is ‘the cause of sovereignty so that the two are inextricably bound in relation’ (10). To say that Vardoulakis does not *ground* his thinking in political theory is not to suggest that there is an absence of engagement with it, he provides extensive and important readings of both classical and contemporary political theory and philosophy. This said, the purpose of his book, in many ways, could be seen as disentangling democracy from primarily political theory, seeking instead to return the concept to its more appropriate ontological place as the condition of political thought; a task not entirely foreign to educational philosophy, most obviously represented by John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* and the experimental schools it has played a part in influencing. While Vardoulakis’s position owes a lot to the thinking of Jacques Derrida, Vardoulakis takes his understanding of the earlier philosopher’s late thought that ‘democracy is an unconditional’ (76) in new and provocative directions. Particularly satisfying is one of the claims with which Vardoulakis closes the book, that ‘democracy is a task — a praxis performed in one’s interactions with others (the ontological aspect) and through the ethicopolitical

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imperative to dejustify violence and a to resist the dissolution of justifications of violence into regimes of legitimation.’ (120). Such a definition provides a ground from which to offer critiques of most purportedly democratic educational practice, as well as the means to begin to outline a practice which might survive or exist productively alongside on that ground. Equally, Vardoulakis makes a strong argument against what could be seen as the dominant thinking on inclusion, which might be creatively be applied to or against the dominant discourses of inclusive education:

The opposite of exclusion is not inclusion – as [Giorgio] Agamben, for instance, thinks – as this plays right into the hands of the ruse of sovereignty. Rather, the opposite of exclusion is the being with of democracy, which emerges through the agonistic engagement with sovereignty. Sovereign violence is an effect of its other, where “other” denotes both those who are the target of violence and the democratic disposition that is opposed to sovereignty. (10).

Democracy is that which ‘cannot be accommodated within sovereignty [and] is also the condition of its possibility’ (10), meaning that the logic of inclusion and exclusion is fundamentally broken. The sovereign violences of education systems are themselves subject to the dejustifying process of democratic praxis. How effective this praxis is depends on us.

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